

The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

ELLERY QUEEN'S *Mystery Magazine*

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a NEW detective story by
JACK RITCHIE

There is an open-air café in Paris where if you sit at a table long enough, it is said, everyone you know will pass by. The legend (surely that's all it is) popped into our mind as we began to prepare this story for the press. We couldn't help thinking that if we sit long enough at our editorial desk, a manuscript from every mystery writer we know will come our way. With this offbeat preamble we now announce how happy we are to publish the first story by Jack Ritchie to appear in EQMM—and what a delightful story! Ingenious, fast-reading, and with that special brand of Ritchie's humor...

NOBODY TELLS ME ANYTHING

by JACK RITCHIE

He was my first client.

"Mr. Turnbuckle," he said, "I'll pay you fifty dollars for each day's report. How does that strike you?"

It struck me as being a bit frugal, but possibly he was prepared to be generous with expenses. I voiced the thought. "Fifty dollars and expenses?"

"I don't foresee any expenses. Just fifty dollars for each day's report. Thirty reports."

I smiled tolerantly. "Fifty dollars a day for confidential investigation might have been a munificent sum twenty or thirty years ago, but by today's standards—"

He held up a hand. "It will not be necessary for you even to leave this office. Just sit down at your typewriter, insert the stationery of your agency, and type the reports, one after another until you are finished. Thirty reports to cover thirty days."

I glanced down at my notes, which consisted of just two words: Paula Smith. "You mean you *don't* want me to find this Paula Smith?"

"Exactly. I want you to do no searching at all. However, fill out

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your reports as though you had been exceedingly busy. Use your imagination. Trace her across the country—on paper—and finally lose her in, say, San Francisco or Seattle. Make it appear that you are sending your reports back here, where a secretary transcribes them, and forwards them to me."

I considered that. "Wouldn't it be cheaper if you just had a few letterheads printed and then filled in the reports yourself?"

"I suppose so. But it would be quite a bother, and besides, I simply don't know the forms used, the methods of search, and the jargon or whatsoever used by private detective agencies, and I want these reports to appear as authentic as possible. I will also need thirty envelopes with your agency imprint."

I nodded to myself. He's going to mail the reports to himself—one at a time—and when they arrive, he intends to show them to one or more other people.

My client was a tall distinguished man in his fifties, graying at the temples, exceedingly well-dressed, and he had refused to tell me his name.

I consulted my sheet of paper again. "Is Paula Smith her real name?"

"Just fill out the reports."

"To whom shall I address the reports?"

"Leave that part blank. I'll fill it in later myself."

I sighed. "Just to recapitulate, we have a missing person, one Paula Smith. You do *not* want me to find her. But she *is* missing, isn't she? Have you gone to the police perhaps?"

He regarded me for a few seconds. "Paula Smith is quite well and, I presume, happy. You need to know no more than that. How long will it take you to compile those reports?"

"Probably a week. I'll have to do some research at the library—things like the names of streets, hotels, restaurants, and the like in various cities. Where was Paula Smith last seen?"

"Why do you need to know that?"

"If she were last seen in the Sahara, I can hardly begin my report by taking up the trail at the North Pole."

He nodded reluctantly. "Begin your report with the statement that you located the taxi which took her and her luggage from 'your residence' to the airport or the bus station. You do not specifically need to know my address."

"What was the date and time she was last seen, and by whom?"

"You do not need to know by whom. But she was last seen Sun-

day at approximately ten o'clock in the evening when she went up to her rooms. Do you suppose I could have the first report by noon today? I'd like to get on this as soon as possible before somebody else—" He stopped and reached for his wallet. It was a fine piece of leather with the initials A.B. in one corner. He handed me two twenties and a ten.

I took the bills. "How did you happen to select my agency?"

"I walked through the yellow pages of the phone book and there you were." He went to the door. "If you have any idea of following me, forget it. I intend to take all due precautions."

When he was gone, I proceeded to think.

What did I have here?

I was being asked to fill out a series of false reports. Why? Obviously to fool someone—to make some person or persons think that this Paula Smith was indeed being searched for, though my client did not have the slightest desire in the world that she be found.

And what about the name Paula Smith itself?

Was the name fictitious? Or did such a person really exist?

I reached for the telephone book and turned to the Smiths. There were legions of them, of course. Several Peter Smiths, but no Paulas or even P. Smiths.

And what about my caller, A.B.?

For one thing, he had said that he had walked through the yellow pages until he found my name and address.

But that was hardly possible since the name of my agency was not yet listed in the book. I had just opened my office three weeks ago. My name would appear in the next issue of the phone book which was not due for distribution for another two months.

Then why and how had he chosen me?

If not by means of the telephone book, had he simply wandered the corridors of downtown buildings until he saw the lettering on my door? Hardly likely. I am on the eighth floor of a twenty-six-story building and there are at least a hundred tall buildings in this city.

Or was it possible that he actually worked in this very building and that during the last three weeks while waiting for the elevator to take him up to his floor he had noticed my agency's name on the directory on the wall? And had it been filed in his memory bank until, when he needed the services of a private detective, it had suddenly leaped to his mind?

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I rubbed my neck. Should I restrain my curiosity, mind my own business, and collect the \$1500 as per order? Is that what an experienced private detective would do?

My phone rang. It was Ralph. He is a detective sergeant on the police force and I was his partner until three weeks ago.

"How are you going, Henry?" he asked.

"I just got my first case."

"Congratulations. My wife and I were a little worried. I mean it's been almost a month since you opened your office."

I cleared my throat. "I just realized that most people consult the yellow pages of the phone book when they want to hire a private detective and I won't be in the book for another two months when the new edition comes out."

"You picked the wrong time of the year to open for business. Why not advertise in the newspapers?"

"I'm not sure that's professionally ethical."

"Henry, I wouldn't worry about ethical as far as the private detective scene is concerned. What's your first case about?"

"A missing person. Paula Smith."

"Smith? Well, I suppose the Smiths get lost now and then too. My wife's wondering if she should bring over some chicken soup or something?"

"No, Ralph. I'm doing just fine."

After he hung up, I went downstairs to the lobby and studied the directory next to the bank of elevators.

I found twelve companies and individuals listed under B. Albert Bancroft, Investments, seemed to be what I was looking for.

I went to the nearby public phone and turned the white pages of the book to the Bancrofts. I found only one Albert Bancroft listed.

I glanced at my watch. It was nearly ten in the morning. Where was Bancroft at this moment? Probably upstairs in his office poring over municipal bonds or something equally exciting.

I checked his address and phone number and then dialed.

The phone was picked up by a man who said, "Bancroft residence."

"Could I speak to Paula?"

There was a pause. "Paula?"

"Yes. Paula Smith."

Another pause. "I'm sorry, sir, but she is no longer in our employ."

Ah, so there really *was* a Paula Smith. And whom was I talking to? He had used the words "Bancroft residence," and had called me "sir." Was he the butler? After all, people who listed their trade as Investments and lived in Bancroft's neighborhood probably could afford to hire butlers. "Is this Jarvis?" I asked.

"No, sir. This is Wisniewski."

"Wisniewski?" I laughed lightly. "Jarvis. Wisniewski. I always seem to get those two names mixed. But you *are* the Bancroft butler, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Of course," I said. "Paula wrote to me about you."

"Miss Smith wrote to you about *me*?" He seemed cautious. "What did she say?"

"I don't remember the exact words, but they were nothing but good."

"Who is this speaking, sir?"

"John Smith. Paula's cousin, twice removed."

"I understood that she had no living relatives."

I chuckled. "I don't blame Paula for not mentioning me. But I'm on parole now. Did she leave a forwarding address?"

"No, sir."

"You mean she just disappeared into thin air?"

"Not exactly into thin air, sir. She just packed up during the night and left. I understand there was a note, sir, but it did not mention where she was going."

What had Paula's job been at the Bancroft's? Cook? I chuckled again and quoted H. H. Munro, better known as "Saki": "She was a good cook, as cooks go. And as good cooks go, she went?"

"Sir?" Wisniewski said.

I had evidently missed the mark. "The *last* place Paula worked, she was a cook," I said. "I just assumed—?"

"She was the housekeeper here, sir."

Housekeeper? What did housekeepers do? Oh, yes. They supervised the other servants, kept the household accounts, and generally feuded with the butler.

When I hung up, I pondered a few moments, then decided that further investigation at the scene of Paula's disappearance was in order.

I left the phone booth for the multi-level garage where I park my car and drove to 217 Lake Crest Drive.

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foot stone pillars. The gates were open, but I had the feeling that a door-to-door salesman would hesitate before considering that an invitation to enter.

I turned into the driveway and followed it through the shade of elms and other greenery until I reached a large Tudor-style structure.

I parked, ascended the wide stairs, and used the knocker. While I waited, I watched an ancient gardener trimming a hedge.

To circumvent the possibility that Wisniewski might recognize my voice, I had intended to speak in a Scots burr, which I perfected while playing the part of Macbeth in my senior year in high school, but a uniformed maid answered the door instead. "Yes, sir?"

Where was Wisniewski? Probably in the pantry polishing the silver or in the cellar turning wine bottles.

"Could I speak to Mr. Bancroft?"

"He is not at home, sir."

"Mrs. Bancroft?"

"I'm afraid not, sir. She died three years ago."

That certainly eliminated her. "Are there any other Bancrofts on the premises?"

"There is Miss Bancroft, sir. Mr. Bancroft's daughter."

"She will do nicely."

"Who shall I say is calling, sir?"

"John P. Jones. Attorney."

She left me there, but returned a minute later and led me to one of the drawing rooms.

Miss Bancroft appeared to be in her early twenties, wore shell-rimmed glasses, and had possibly been reading the open book on the cocktail table.

"I'm Marianne Bancroft," she said. "What can I do for you?"

"I understand that you have in your employ one Miss Paula Smith? Could I speak to her?"

"Paula?" Marianne Bancroft shook her head. "Paula is gone. She left sometime before Monday morning when we were all asleep. Bag and baggage. There was a note, but it didn't say where she was going."

"Did it say *why* she left?"

"She said she was just fed up here and had decided to move on. Why do you want to find her?"

"Her uncle Theophilus Smith died and left her some money."

"Was it a lot?"

"Not really. About a thousand. I know very little about Paula Smith besides her name. How old was she?"

"About forty. But she looked younger when she tried."

"How long was she housekeeper here?"

"Less than a year."

I noticed a framed photograph of three people on the corner shelf. One of them was my client, Albert Bancroft, another Marianne, and the third probably Bancroft's son, a younger, thinner, and taller version of his father.

"Did anyone see Paula leave?" I asked.

"If they did, no one's said so."

I assumed a thoughtful pose. "You don't suppose I could have a look at her room just on the off chance that there might be some indication of where she was going? Perhaps some scrap of paper or some underlined portion of a bus schedule?"

She led me up to the third floor. "You look familiar. I could swear that I've seen you somewhere before." She opened the door to Paula Smith's suite. "Sitting room, bedroom, bathroom."

I opened the sliding doors to a large closet. It was completely bare except for a few wire hangers, but the scent of perfume and powder still lingered. "I always think of housekeepers as wearing uniforms. With maybe a dress or two for going out?"

"Housekeepers don't wear uniforms any more. At least I can't think of any who do. Paula probably had that closet full of clothes. I know she was always sending things to the cleaners or getting them back. Are you going to scour the ends of the earth until you find her?"

"Not for one thousand dollars. We'll just put it in escrow and hope that someday she'll get in touch with somebody who'll tell her about us. You don't happen to have a photograph of her?"

"No."

"What did she look like?"

Marianne shrugged. "Quite tall and—well-developed. Blonde."

"There isn't any shortage or anything of that nature in her household accounts?"

"Nobody's checked yet, but I doubt it. I'm willing to bet that her books are in perfect order. She was after bigger—" She stopped.

"Are you sure you're not some kind of detective?"

I smiled. "Well, there is quite a bit of detecting involved in tracing heirs." I moved to a door on the farther wall of the bedroom

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and opened what appeared to be another closet or storage area. A large steamer trunk stood upright but open in the otherwise empty space. It appeared to be almost fully packed with dresses, skirts, and coats.

"Paula's?" I asked.

Marianne moved closer. "It appears to be. I recognize some of the clothes."

"Why would she leave this behind?"

"I don't know. Maybe she intended to send someone back for it."

"But wouldn't she at least *close* the trunk and probably lock it before she left?"

"Perhaps she just decided that it was all too much to take along with her."

"It all looks like fairly good quality. Would she abandon it?"

"Why not?" Marianne said a bit testily. "She could always buy more. She didn't leave here exactly empty—" She stopped and smiled sweetly. "Anything else?"

"Did Paula own an automobile?"

"No."

"Did she have any other luggage besides this trunk?"

"I seem to remember two suitcases when she came here."

"This note she left? Do you mind if I see it?"

"It doesn't exist any more. I tossed it into the fireplace."

"Why?"

"Because I felt like it."

When I returned to my office, I phoned police headquarters and left a message for Ralph to call me when he next checked in.

Then I sat down at my typewriter and began composing my first report for Bancroft.

At ten after eleven Ralph phoned.

"Ralph," I said, "I'd like you to find out if Paula Smith left a forwarding address at the post office and also if she had or has any savings or checking accounts in her own name. I'd do it myself, but you're on active duty and that opens doors and saves time."

Ralph clicked his tongue. "Shame on you, Henry, using a public servant for private business. The post office will be easy, but the bank accounts won't—do you know how many banks there are in this town?"

"Try the branch banks in the Fiebrantz shopping center. It's only half a mile from the Bancroft place."

"And what is the Bancroft place?"

"That's where Paula Smith worked until the night she disappeared."

At noon, when Bancroft stepped into my office, I had two reports ready for him. "So far I trace her from your residence to a pizza parlor in Billings, Montana."

He read and nodded. "These look fine."

I offered him two envelopes. He put the second report into one of them, but not the first, from which I deduced that he intended to show the first report to someone immediately and did not want to wait out the time lag of mailing the report to himself.

He produced his wallet and handed me another \$50 for the second report. "I'll drop in every day to pick up whatever reports you've finished."

After he left, I paused to wonder again why he preferred to remain anonymous. Was he just embarrassed over the charade, or was he afraid that I might possibly attempt to blackmail him later? After all, he obviously had something to conceal and if I knew his identity I might find out what it was all about and attempt to profit from it.

Ralph phoned me in the afternoon. "The post office says that Paula Smith left no forwarding address. And according to the First National Branch at Fiebrantz, Paula Smith still has a checking account there. Balance \$112.16. The bank's records show that she deposited her paycheck into the account each month and was usually overdrawn by the time the month was over."

"Why would she leave \$112.16 behind?"

"That isn't necessarily a final balance, Henry. There might be some checks outstanding. She could have closed the account for all practical purposes."

"Ralph, when Paula left the Bancroft's place she probably took along a couple of suitcases. She didn't own an automobile, so she must have taken a taxi."

"I'll check on it. But maybe someone in the Bancroft house drove her to the airport or bus station or whatever."

"If anybody did, he certainly hasn't volunteered the information."

In the afternoon I dropped in at the main library for research that carried Paula from Billings to the Custer Battlefield National Monument and then on to the Cheyenne Frontier Days Rodeo.

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That evening, at home in my apartment, I created and consumed my supper, and then sat down to TV, turning, as usual, to the educational channel. I was quietly engrossed in the history of barrel making when my door buzzer sounded.

I identified my caller immediately as Albert Bancroft's son. He looked even taller and thinner than his photograph.

He introduced himself. "My name is Jerome Bancroft. Are you the Turnbuckle of the Turnbuckle Detective Agency?"

I nodded.

He cleared his throat. "I understand that my father is employing your agency to search for Paula Smith? My father showed me your first report this evening and I memorized your letterhead." He stepped into the room. "I knew you wouldn't be in your office at this time of the night, of course, so I looked in the white pages of the telephone book. You are the only Turnbuckle listed."

I beamed proudly. "The Turnbuckle line is long but narrow. What can I do for you?"

He seemed uncomfortable. "Do you think your agency will find Paula?"

I shrugged. "One can only do one's best."

He took the chair I offered. "I don't know what father is paying you to search for Paula, but I'm willing to double it—if you do *not* find her."

I raised an eyebrow. Here was someone else who didn't want Paula Smith found and was willing to pay handsomely for it. "Why don't you want her found?"

"It's a personal reason. I really don't think it's necessary that you know."

I went to my TV set, which at the moment featured a cooper spoke-shaving some barrel staves, and turned it off. "I have the strangest suspicion about this case. Is Paula Smith still alive?"

He seemed surprised at the question. "Alive? Of course she's alive. I just don't want her to be found and persuaded to return."

"Do you know where she is now?"

"No."

"Why did she leave in the first place?"

Jerome Bancroft took half a minute to wrestle with a decision and then sighed. "I guess I might just as well give you the whole story. I *paid* Paula to leave. Twenty thousand dollars, to be exact. I felt that Paula had an undue influence on my father and that it was just a question of time before he asked her to marry him."

"You didn't think that Paula Smith was a suitable stepmother?"

"Frankly, no. As a matter of fact, she was considerably free with the amount of personal attention she paid to *me* too."

"You were attracted to her?"

"Actually she frightened me half to death."

"But still you were afraid that she might seduce you?"

"No. Frightened or not, I do have a mind of my own. I would have been able to resist her, regardless of temptation or perfume, both of which were considerable. But I was worried for Dad's sake. I don't know how strong he is in matters of this nature."

"Did the fact that Paula Smith, as your father's wife, would be in a position to claim a considerable share of your father's wealth disturb you?"

"Not particularly. Both Marianne, that's my sister, and I have quite enough money in our own right. Personally we both feel that Dad ought to remarry, but we can think of a number of more suitable candidates."

"So you offered Paula Smith twenty thousand dollars to leave the household?"

He frowned thoughtfully. "Now that I think it over, I'm not quite positive whether I offered or she *suggested* that I give her the money and she would leave. Anyway, I handed her twenty thousand in cash on Sunday afternoon. She promised that she would leave on Monday while Dad and I were at the office. She said she'd leave a note saying that she was just fed up with the job and had decided to get out. The note was so that Dad wouldn't think she'd been kidnaped or something and call the police."

"And she left the note?"

"Yes. On her bedroom dresser."

"But instead of leaving Monday she left sometime between ten P.M. Sunday, when she was last seen going up to her rooms, and seven A.M. Monday, when she was scheduled to report for duty, so to speak?"

"Yes. I don't know why though. Maybe she thought I'd think things over and demand the twenty thousand back. So she decided to skip while the skipping was good."

I debated whether to tell him that his father apparently had as little desire as he to have Paula Smith return, then I decided that this case needed a little more investigation first.

Jerome Bancroft brought out his checkbook. "How much would you like as a retainer?"

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I pondered. What would your average private detective do? Take money for not doing a job for which he was already being paid for not doing? I'd have to think it over. "A retainer will not be necessary," I said. "I prefer to bill at the completion—or in this case, the noncompletion—of my job."

When he was gone, I turned on my TV set just in time to catch Winnebago Indians harvesting wild rice.

The next morning I completed several more reports tracing Paula Smith to Salt Lake City, where by finding a ticket stub in a room she had just vacated at the Excelsior Motel, I deduced that she had the night previous attended a concert of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

In the afternoon Ralph phoned.

"No taxi picked up a fare anywhere near the Bancroft residence either on Sunday or Monday," he said. "Maybe she phoned a relative or a friend to pick her up?"

"She told the butler she had no living relatives. As for friends outside of the household, I don't know. Nobody's mentioned any."

"If someone from the house drove her away, why is he so shy about mentioning it?"

"Maybe she wasn't alive when he drove her away."

Late in the afternoon a silhouette appeared at the opaque glass of my door and the knob turned.

Marianne Bancroft entered my office.

Her eyes widened. "*You? You* are the Turnbuckle Detective Agency?"

I thought for a flashing moment of telling her that I just happened to be visiting, but there I was coatless and before a typewriter.

So I admitted the fact. "Yes, I am Henry Turnbuckle. I'm sorry if I misrepresented myself yesterday, but it was necessary in my pursuit of information."

She regarded me with narrow-eyed suspicion, but nevertheless got to the point. "I understand that my father hired you to find Paula Smith."

I dodged the exact point delicately. "I am in your father's employ, yes."

"All right. I don't know what he's paying you to find her, but I'll double it if you *don't* find her."

I had heard those words before, of course, and I repeated my part of the dialogue. "Why don't you want her found?"

"I really don't think it is necessary you know."

I closed my eyes for a few reflective moments and then opened them. "The pieces are beginning to fall into place. You do not want me to find Paula Smith for the simple reason that you *paid* her to leave. Possibly twenty thousand dollars?"

Naturally she was astounded. "How did you know that?"

I tapped my forehead with a finger. "Sheer deductive reasoning based solidly on coincidence. And the reason you paid her to leave and do not want to have her found and returned is that you feel she was on the verge of entrapping either your father or your brother into matrimony."

She was, for the moment, speechless.

I smiled understandingly. "My dear Miss Bancroft, neither your father *nor* your brother has the slightest desire ever to see Paula again. As a matter of fact, your brother also offered me double what his father was paying me if I also did *not* find Paula."

She was confused. "Why did father hire you in the first place, if he doesn't want Paula back?"

"I believe he was under the impression that your brother was infatuated with Paula. She seems to have been clever at creating conflicting impressions. It wouldn't surprise me at all if your father *also* was conned into paying her to leave. And it occurred to him that when Jerome discovered that Paula was gone, he might be heartbroken enough to decide to employ a private detective to find her. And he might have, at that. So to forestall that possibility, your father hired me not to look for her, but to prepare a number of reports to make it appear as though I was conducting an extensive search. He would show them to Jerome to indicate that everything was already being done to find her."

Marianne sighed. "I guess the three of us will just have to get together and compare notes." She regarded me for a few moments and then frowned. "Now I remember where I saw you before. When the Culbersons had that break-in and jewel robbery at their place a couple of years ago, I dropped by because I wanted to hear all about it from Jenny Culberson. The place was overrun with police and detectives." She nodded reflectively. "And you were there questioning one of the maids. You and another man, both in plainclothes. He was kind of chubby, with straw-colored hair."

"That was Ralph, my partner."

She stared at me accusingly. "You're not a private detective, you're a public detective."

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"Well, yes and no. At the moment I'm on educational leave from the department. I'm doing my Master's on quasi-police organizations—like the Merchant Police, security guards, private detective agencies, and things like that. As part of my research, I'm putting in a spell as a private detective. My license cost me fifteen dollars, but I expect it's worth it."

She was still dubious. "You mean the police department put you on leave for something like that?"

I nodded. "Frankly, I *did* feel a little guilty about being absent from the force for one whole year and possibly letting them down in some way, but Captain Wilkerson was very understanding. He not only approved my application, but actually urged me to take the year off. As a matter of fact, he generously suggested that I make it two or three years."

She smiled faintly. "I know one thing for certain, Henry Turnbuckle, you'll never become a *rich* private detective."

I shrugged. "Well, I certainly have never expected to."

"I mean now that you've cleared the air, it isn't necessary any more for either me or my brother to double the money Dad is paying you, is it? And as for Dad, I don't know what he's given you so far, but he really has no reason now to pay you any more, does he?"

Good heavens! She was right. In my moment of candor I had shot down my own financial balloon. I frowned. What would an experienced private detective do in a situation like this? Threaten to find Paula Smith on his own and bring her back unless the family paid? I rejected that after a few moments' consideration. No, that would be blackmail.

Marianne seemed about to pat me on the shoulder. "I'll tell you what, Henry, I'll take you home and the family will come through with some kind of settlement that won't leave you exactly empty-handed."

We used her car for the transportation to the Bancroft mansion and I'm afraid I was a bit moody during the ride. When we arrived, two other automobiles were parked in front of the house.

"Dad and Jerome are home," Marianne said. She led me to a drawing room where we found Bancroft Sr. and Jerome.

A large man, well over six feet tall, balding, and wearing a butler's uniform stood at the liquor cabinet making drinks. I deduced that this was Wisniewski.

Both of the Bancrofts blanched when they saw me.

"It's all right, Dad," Marianne said. "I'll explain everything." She did, and during the course of the explanation and clarification, I learned that Bancroft Sr. had also paid Paula Smith \$20,000 to leave.

I had been thinking heavily while they talked and suddenly I saw the light at the end of the tunnel. "Ah, hah!" I said, gaining their attention.

I smiled tightly. "Paula Smith privately assured each one of you that she would leave secretly on Monday while all of you were gone from the house for one reason or another, presumably to 'prevent' some member of the family from pleading with her to remain. And yet she left suddenly the night before. Why?"

None of them had the answer.

I continued: "It is my belief that Paula Smith was murdered here some time after ten P.M. on Sunday—when she was last seen alive—and seven A.M. on Monday, when she normally assumed her duties for the day, and that her body was removed from the premises by her murderer."

They blinked, of course, and Marianne said, "Are you intimating that she changed her mind about going and that one of us killed her to get her out of the way?"

"No. I think she planned to go. She had milked all three of you for about as much as she could expect and she probably thought that you were on the verge of comparing notes and learning that none of you actually wanted her to remain. You might even decide to go to the police. After all, the entire scheme was a form of extortion. No, she had decided to leave, but before she could go voluntarily, she was murdered. You ask why? And by whom?"

None of them did, but I felt that the questions were implied.

"The Why is obvious," I said confidently. "For the sixty thousand dollars in cash which she had accumulated."

Albert Bancroft seemed shocked. "I know that I certainly would not kill *anyone* for *any* amount of money."

Jerome agreed. "Neither would I. Besides, I couldn't strangle anybody. My wrists are too weak."

I thought that over and regarded Jerome piercingly. "What makes you think she was strangled?"

He shrugged. "Nobody seems to have heard a shot and if a knife or a bludgeon were used, there would be blood sprayed about, I imagine, but nobody's mentioned any. So I opt for strangulation."

He seemed to have a keen mind. I continued: "The fact remains

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that Paula was murdered and that her murderer knew that she planned to leave on Monday and used that fact as a coverup for the murder. And after killing her he carried her body downstairs and put it into an automobile or a station wagon and then returned to her room, finished packing her suitcases, and took them away with him."

"Why didn't he take the trunk too?" Marianne asked.

"Either he didn't know it was in that closet or, if he did, he probably felt that it was too great a risk attempting to carry a fully loaded trunk down three flights of stairs in the dead of night without making enough noise to waken someone. Or possibly he thought that each of you would just assume that Paula had decided at the last moment to abandon the trunk of clothes. After all, she had plenty of money to buy more."

Marianne nodded. "And you think that a man has to be the murderer because of the heaving and hauling involved with the body? After all, Paula was rather a full-bodied woman."

"Exactly. And who in this household, besides your father and your brother, is capable of carrying a hefty body down three flights of stairs?"

"Who?" Marianne asked.

I smiled. "Shall we consider the gardener for a moment?"

"Hector?" Marianne shook her head. "He's sixty-five and I doubt if he weighs over one hundred and twenty pounds."

I agreed. "You are quite right, Marianne. The murderer couldn't have been Hector."

Wisniewski had been doing make-work at the liquor cabinet so that he could remain in the room.

Now I turned to him and pointed triumphantly. "You, Wisniewski, *you* are the murderer of Paula Smith!"

He regarded me coldly. "Utterly ridiculous, sir. How could I possibly have known that Miss Smith had sixty thousand dollars in her possession?"

I chuckled meaningfully. "Miss Smith was a woman who, shall we say, came on strong. She lived in this house for almost a year, all the while apparently getting noplacé at all with any member of the opposite sex, and frankly, in her case, I think that would have been both unendurable and unbelievable. She had to find some man who would prove more compliant and more willing—"

Wisniewski's crown reddened. "Preposterous, sir. She was definitely not my type."

Albert Bancroft was still aghast. "You mean that in this case it was the *butler* who did it?"

"Yes," I said firmly. "The butler." I scowled at Wisniewski. "And so there you were with a body on your hands. What did you do with it? Hide it on the grounds? No. A bit too risky. You might be seen or the body found at some future date. No, you had to take the body somewhere else to dispose of it. A lake? A river? But bodies have a nasty habit of floating to the surface eventually. Or did you bury Paula? Do you own some property around here? Perhaps a cabin on a lake? Certainly an ideal remote burial place."

There was silence.

The Bancrofts and Wisniewski had assumed a stance of deep thought.

After a while Marianne spoke. "Meadows is the murderer."

"Meadows?" I said. "Who is Meadows?"

"The chauffeur."

"Chauffeur?" I said. "What chauffeur?"

"He has quarters over the garage," Albert Bancroft said.

I frowned. "Nobody told me you had a chauffeur."

"Come to think of it," Jerome Bancroft said, "Paula and Meadows were a sort of package deal from that employment agency, weren't they, Marianne?"

I was getting a bit warm. "No one said a damn word about Meadows and Paula coming here at the same time from the same employment agency."

Wisniewski rubbed his chin. "Now that I reflect on it, there were a number of times when I saw the two of them together in what one might call close circumstances."

"Now look here," I said, my voice rising a bit. "How can anybody expect me to solve anything if I'm kept in the dark? No one even hinted that Paula and Meadows were the *least* interested in each other."

"Meadows is about twenty-five," Marianne said. "And Paula was at least forty and it was beginning to show. She must have told him about the sixty thousand dollars and they even planned on going away together. But he was getting tired of her and figured that this was the time to split, and with the money."

I glared out of the nearest window. "Suppositions, suppositions."

Wisniewski brightened. "I believe that Meadows once mentioned that his uncle had a hunting cabin on an acre of land up

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north. An ideal place to bury Paula. It's probably miles from neighbors."

I turned back to them. "Now there's another example. No one had the decency to tell me that Meadows had an uncle or that this mysterious uncle had a hunting cabin."

"The money," Marianne said. "If the police find the money on or near Meadows, that ought to incriminate him."

"Ha," I snorted. "But suppose they don't find the money on or near Meadows? Then what?"

"In that case they'll tell Meadows they're going to go over his uncle's land with a fine-tooth comb. That ought to crack him wide-open."

"Nonsense," I said. "Nobody cracks wide-open just because someone threatens to search the land around his uncle's hunting cabin."

Wisniewski phoned the police and told them what we knew and what we suspected.

When they arrived, they talked to Meadows and in the course of questioning mentioned that they were going to have a look at the land surrounding his uncle's hunting cabin.

Meadows cracked wide-open.

My phone rang.

It was Ralph. "Well, everything's wrapped up. Meadows led us to the spot where he buried Paula's body and her two suitcases. The money was hidden under the floorboards of his uncle's cabin."

My fingers paradiddled on my desk top. "I knew positively that the murderer had to be a man because to carry a deadweight body down three flights of stairs—"

"Actually he killed her in the garage," Ralph said. "He waited until she wrote the letter she was going to leave and then he lured her down there. Hit her over the head. We found bloodstains on the cement floor."

"Hm," I said thoughtfully. "Undoubtedly he used a tire iron."

"Henry," Ralph said. "You don't find tire irons around private garages any more. The murder weapon was a geologist's hammer."

"What the devil was a geologist's hammer doing in a garage?"

"Meadows and Paula Smith were a team. They pulled the same stunt at other places. When the money ran out, they'd get another job and work the routine again. But Meadows got tired of Paula.

She was a lot older than him. So Meadows decided that while it was a nice racket, he'd just as soon work with somebody younger. Like Fifi."

"Fifi?" I said. "Who's Fifi?"

"The Bancrofts' upstairs maid."

"Nobody told me that the Bancrofts had an upstairs maid named Fifi."

"She wasn't in on the murder, but Meadows told her about the racket and she was ready to take Paula's place. She's gaga about Meadows."

"Ralph," I said a trifle reproachingly, "nobody told me that Fifi was gaga about Meadows. If people persist in withholding information, it only makes things that much more difficult for me."

Soon after Ralph hung up, a familiar silhouette appeared against the glass of my door.

Marianne entered and smiled. "Hi. What time is it?"

I consulted my watch. "Two minutes to eleven."

My phone rang.

It was a woman's voice. "I suspect that my husband is having an affair and I'd like to have him followed."

I wondered idly how the caller had got my phone number. "Certainly, Madam. I'll put one of my best operatives on the job. Your name, please?"

"Darlington. Mrs. Darlington. Could I see you this afternoon?"

"Just one moment, please, I'll have to check my appointment book." I waited twenty seconds and then said, "Ah, yes. Would two o'clock be convenient? I have an opening then."

"Fine. I'll be there."

I put down the phone and smiled. "Well, Marianne, I've got another case. A Mrs. Darlington and possible infidelity."

Marianne nodded. "Winifred should have suspected long ago."

"Winifred?" I said. "Who's Winifred?"

"Winifred Darlington. I gave her your phone number and said to call at eleven. I'm just dying to find out who Edward's been going out with."

"Edward?" I said. "Who's—" I stopped. "Never mind. I can guess who Edward is and I have to guess because nobody ever tells me anything." I stalked to my filing cabinet and opened the bottom drawer. I pulled out the bottle and drank two stiff fingers of sherry.

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